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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HOSTS RECEPTION FOR MAURITANIAN  
BUSINESS LEADERS

REF: STATE 112468

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Ambassador hosted an off the record, roundtable discussion for a diverse group of seven Mauritanian business leaders to discuss the challenges Mauritania faces to stimulate economic growth, provide employment to young Mauritians and to create economic opportunities for women. The participants were particularly pleased to take part in the discussion and they generally agreed that the Mauritanian educational system does not provide adequate preparation for young Mauritians to seek employment and that inefficiencies and corruption in the financial and judicial systems prevent legitimate investments that may lead to domestic economic growth. The participants strongly recommended that any USG initiatives include not just funding, but technical assistance training and exchanges to provide a working model or example for Mauritania to follow. They highlighted that Mauritania's ability to benefit from AGOA eligibility will be largely dependent upon not just the passage of AGOA, but actively working with Mauritanian entrepreneurs to learn how to benefit from AGOA. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On December 28, 2009, Ambassador Boulware opened his home to host a roundtable discussion with seven of the Mauritanian business leaders nominated by Post for President Obama's proposed entrepreneurship summit. The invited guests included young management level officials from two of the largest banks in Mauritania, two self-made entrepreneurs and a number of leaders in NGOs or community service groups that focus on microfinance, after-school education programs and entrepreneurial development for Mauritanian youth. The event coincided with last week's White House announcement that Mauritania's AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act) eligibility had been restored. Given the tense bilateral relation following the 2008 military coup d'etat in Mauritania, the AGOA announcement was interpreted by the Mauritanian guests as a welcomed sign of the renewed bilateral relations following the July 2009 election of President Aziz.

¶3. (U) The event was a small and off the record gathering, which provided an opportunity for a diverse group of Mauritanian men and women to interact and discuss their goals and interests. The attendees represent diverse political and ethnic backgrounds who do not frequently interact in the same social and professional settings. One of the biggest accomplishments of the event was the fact that these diverse Mauritians, all concerned about economic growth and stability, were introduced to one another in an apolitical setting, which allowed for a very frank and open discussion about the challenges facing the Mauritanian economy and business community.

¶4. (U) The participants were extremely grateful for the opportunity to speak frankly with the Ambassador and with one another. The event itself generated a significant amount of goodwill among these community leaders. Many of the attendees had divergent opinions about specific topics, but in general

agreed with two main points: the educational system in Mauritania is not adequately preparing the young generation of Mauritians for meaningful work, and that the inefficient financial and judicial systems are a hindrance to Mauritania's economic growth.

15. (SBU) The lack of an efficiently functioning financial system to match borrowers and lenders was underscored when the entrepreneurs claimed that it is difficult, if not impossible, for Mauritanian businesses to find financial backing, while the bankers in attendance claimed that they are eager to do more lending, but they cannot find appropriate projects to support. Additionally, all participants agreed that corruption coupled with a weak judicial system discourages legitimate investments in domestic industries that could become an engine for economic growth. While not directly stated because of the diverse political viewpoints in attendance, but implied in many comments, was the notion that Mauritania's disruptive political climate has made it difficult to address the shortcomings of the financial, judicial and educational systems.

16. (U) There was widespread agreement that any USG programs include a significant amount of technical assistance to address the general lack of "know how" in the Mauritanian governmental and commercial spheres. While the group was pleased to hear about Mauritania's AGOA reinstatement, many indicated that without some sort of workshop or training to teach Mauritanian entrepreneurs how to take advantage of trade with the USA, AGOA would have little impact. Given the small size of the Mauritanian economy and the relative lack

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of trade between the USA and Mauritania, this point should be strongly considered for future USG-sponsored outreach programs. For AGOA to have a significant impact in Mauritania, the USG should endeavor to provide any technical assistance or training available to both Mauritanian government offices and entrepreneurs. It may be valuable to arrange for any Mauritanian participants in the Entrepreneurship Summit in Washington to meet with officials who can describe various ways African countries have embraced AGOA to create jobs and economic growth.

17. (U) While all of the guests were engaged in the conversation, three of the more dynamic participants are final selectees chosen to represent Mauritania at the Entrepreneurial Summit in Washington, DC. Leila Bouamatou, a young female business leader spoke passionately about the importance of education, particularly for young women in Mauritania. Mariem Mint Mohamed Saleh, who will be chairing a foundation that aims to promote entrepreneurship for youth spoke about her experience starting her own business as a woman and was particularly interested in judicial and financial reform to encourage other entrepreneurs like herself. Amadou Baro, a self-made, Afro-Mauritanian business leader and the coordinator of after school education programs also discussed the failures of the educational system and emphasized the need for financial reform to encourage financial lending to young entrepreneurs. Mauritania's nominees truly represent a broad spectrum of ideas and backgrounds and will offer constructive insights during their participation in the upcoming summit.

BOULWARE